

Chicago park site tested for thorium

Advocates hope
lakefront project
gets needed push

By Julie Deardorff
Tribune staff reporter

DuSable Park, an undeveloped, controversial patch of lakefront land at the mouth of the Chicago River, was tested for radioactive thorium Tuesday, a hopeful sign to park advocates who have been waiting for a commemorative public space there for more than 15 years.

The thorium contamination, discovered two years ago, is just the latest obstacle in the park's rocky evolution. Since then, the project has been stalled until the level of contamination is known and can be removed.

Results of the soil samples are expected in three to four weeks, said Fred Micke, the on-scene coordinator with the Environmental Protection Agency, which conducted the testing along with a former owner of the property, Kerr-McGee.

"It has been a struggle, but the three-acre peninsula will be a jewel when it's completed," said Linda Wheeler of the Chicago DuSable League, a member of the DuSable Park Coalition.

For many park supporters, the extended battle over the isolated, overgrown meadow is more than just an attempt to preserve one of the last undeveloped pieces of land in the River East area. The park was named when it was nothing but a vision, and it was meant to honor Chicago's first non-native settler, Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, who arrived in the area by canoe.

Virtually inaccessible and hidden from view, the neglected parcel between the Chicago River and Ogden Slip near Navy Pier was designated as a park in 1987 during then-Mayor Harold Washington's administration. But it wasn't until July 1999 that the Chicago Park District, which now owns the land, completed preliminary plans. A year later, the Park District galvanized community groups by announcing plans to lease the land for a parking lot. In response to protests, the parking lot idea was indefinitely shelved.

When the EPA surveyed the area as part of a general investigation into the Streeterville community, where several sites had already been con-

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taminated with thorium, DuSable Park also recorded signs of radioactive material. The source is most likely the old Lindsay Light Co., which used thorium to make lantern mantles from 1910 to 1936. Aerial photos show that mounds of soil and construction debris were deposited at the DuSable Park site between the mid-1970s and early 1980s, the EPA said.

Though thorium is a naturally occurring, radioactive metal present in small amounts in all rocks, soil, water, plants and animals, it also is a carcinogen that can be lethal at high doses.

"This [testing] is long overdue," said Bob O'Neill, president of the Grant Park Advisory Council, a member of the DuSable Park Coalition. "We need to know how extensive the cleanup is. If we have to cart out all the soil, it's obviously a much bigger deal than capping over it."

But just who pays for the cleanup, if one is necessary, is still unresolved. Though officials with the EPA's Superfund program are involved, the park is classified as a "non-time critical removal site," meaning it's not a national priority. Cleanup of the thorium site in West Chicago, for example—which was a critical removal site—cost more than \$400 million.

"We need to see the scope of the problem. How much we find will have some bearing on how easy it is to come to a resolution about who pays," said EPA Superfund spokesman Mick Hans. "There will be discussions between the EPA, Kerr-McGee, the Park District and others involved in the property over the years."

In addition to the potential cleanup, the site's revetment wall might need to be rebuilt and could cost \$2.5 million, O'Neill said. Repairs alone would be around \$400,000.

The park itself is expected to cost \$5 million, and so far, \$1.1 million in private funding has been raised for the site, including a statue of du Sable to be created by sculptor Martin Puryear, a former professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Puryear, who lives in New York, is soliciting public comment on his proposal and held a meeting Tuesday at the Art Institute of Chicago. On Monday, he met with the presidents of the DuSable Museum of African-American History, the Art Institute and the Chicago Historical Society to discuss the statue, which has generated controversy over its abstract design.

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Tribune photo by Scott Strazzante

Workers test the DuSable Park site near Navy Pier for radioactive thorium. Park advocates saw the tests as a hopeful sign.

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